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A Pliable Reality: Towards a Construction of a Nabokovian Narrative Model

«I shall take care of you, against my dream checking the pliable reality.»

V. Nabokov, *The Walz Invention*

Résumé

Bien que le large corpus de la prose nabokovienne forme une oeuvre homogène, il existe peu d'études systématiques du mode narratif nabokovien. Nabokov prétend que le vrai conflit ne se situe pas entre les personnages d'un roman mais entre l'auteur et le lecteur. Dans le texte nabokovien cette tension s'exprime en fonction des diverses opérations rhétoriques et épistémologiques qui affectent la subversion; le texte postule pour nier, affirme pour transgresser. La subversion est présente dans la narration nabokovienne autant au niveau de l'histoire que du discours, modifiant la structure actantielle et les modalités du processus narratif. C'est dans cette perspective que cet essai se propose d'examiner un des systèmes sémiologiques qui constituent le mode narratif nabokovien, notamment «les signes de la narrativité.» (Barthes: 1977, 43). Pour concrétiser mon étude, je prendrai comme texte exemplaire le roman *The Eye* de Nabokov.

1.0 Although the large corpus of Nabokov's fiction writings clearly forms a unified *oeuvre*, an homogeneous Nabokovian text, few attempts have been made at a systematic study of the Nabokovian narrative mode. «The true conflict,» contends Nabokov «is not between the characters of a novel but between author and reader.» In the Nabokovian text this tension is primarily sustained through

recourse to the various rhetorical and epistemological operations affecting subversion: the text posits to deny, affirms to transgress. Subversion is present in Nabokov's narratives on both the *histoire* and the *discours* levels, affecting the actional structure as well as the modalities of the narrational process.¹ The present essay proposes to examine, in this light, one of the systems of signs constituting the Nabokovian narrative mode, namely «les signes de la narrativité, l'ensemble des opérateurs qui réintègrent fonctions et actions dans la communication narrative, articulées sur son donneur et son destinataire.» (Barthes: 1977, 43) For purposes of clarity, my discussion will employ Nabokov's *The Eye* as a focal and exemplary text.

Before embarking on our discussion, a brief review of Gérard Genette's theoretical concepts, which will inform the methodological aspect of this essay, is due. Genette (*Figures III*, 1972) distinguishes between three levels of the narrative work: *histoire*, *récit*, and *narration*, which he defines as follows:

Je propose ... de nommer *histoire* le signifié ou contenu narratif ...
récit proprement dit le signifiant, énoncé, discours ou texte narratif lui-même, et *narration* l'acte narratif producteur et, par extension, l'ensemble de la situation réelle ou fictive dans laquelle il prend place. (p. 72)

Genette subsequently goes on to examine three sets of relationships, *récit-histoire*, *récit-narration*, and *histoire-narration*, which he inspects in terms of three broad narrative categories: Time, Mode (form and degree of narrative representation), and Voice. The category of Voice, aspects of which this essay will study in relation to Nabokov's fiction, is concerned with those problems «qui tiennent à la façon dont se trouve impliquée dans le récit la narration elle-même au sens où nous l'avons définie, c'est-à-dire la situation ou instance narrative, et avec elle ses deux protagonistes: le narrateur et son destinataire, réel ou virtuel.» (pp. 75-76)

The narrative situation of a text should not be confused with its «situation d'écriture» (the historical author's position), nor is it to be determined by the grammatical person designated in the text (first or third person narration); instead, Genette proposes a classification of the narrative situation according to the relative position of its three basic constituents: «temps de la narration», «niveau narratif», and «personne». Depending on the temporal position which the narrative instance occupies in relation to the *histoire*, it is regarded as either ulterior (classical text in the past), anterior («récit prédictif»), simultaneous (text in the present tense), or interwoven (in between moments of action).

Genette, moreover, distinguished between four types of narrators, determined according to the narrative level to which they belong (either extradiegetic, intradiegetic, or metadiegetic), and to the degree of their participation in or absence from the *histoire* they narrate:

- (a) extradiegetic-heterodiegetic – an 'external narrator' who is not a fictional character in the *histoire* he narrates ...
- (b) extradiegetic-homodiegetic – an 'external narrator' who narrates his own story ...

- (c) intradiegetic-heterodiegetic – a fictional narrator (or 'second degree' narrator) who narrates events in which he does not participate, ...

- (d) intradiegetic-homodiegetic – a fictional narrator ... who tells his own story. (Rimmon: 1976,55)

Genette's discussion of the principles according to which the narrative levels are to be determined is sketchy and on the whole ostensive; he does, however, specify that «l'instance narrative d'un récit premier est donc par définition extradiegtique, comme l'instance narrative d'un récit second est par définition diegtique.» (p. 239) Thus, narrative levels are defined by their degree of irreversibility, for whereas an extradiegetic position can always signify in its discourse the act of enunciation of the intradiegetic position, the reverse is not possible.

Now, the great majority of Nabokov's novels has a personal narrative at the final extradiegetic level; some of these novels (e.g. *The Gift*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Invitation to a Wedding*) have impersonal narratives on the inferior narrative levels, others (e.g. *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*) have independent personal narratives on the inferior narrative levels, and yet others (e.g. *The Eye*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*) have a unified personal narrative throughout.² The very existence, however, of a source personal narrative in all these novels posits a narrator who is constantly held responsible for every word in the narrative; «disant 'je'» states Benveniste, «je ne puis ne pas parler de moi.» (Benveniste: 1966, 228) This narrator, moreover, is identified and characterized by his speech act: unlike the impersonal narrator's discourse, his leads back to himself. Since the personal narrator's discourse is an act which is part of the fictive world, a performative and not merely referential discourse, parts of the narrative in which the «I» does not appear on the surface are perceived as having a higher performative noun-phrase, such as «I say that...», in the deep structure. (Tamir, 1976,424.) The novels in which a personal narrator appears on the final extradiegetic level are thus to be regarded as extended personal narratives, with the further implication that this narrator is to be regarded as their main and primary subject, as well as object, of enunciation. The term I-Origo will be used in this essay to designate this narrator whose discourse, a personal narrative, serves as a frame and source for all other speech events that appear throughout the narrative. Thus, the I-Origo's discourse occupies an original position in the text, for it is «the Origo of the system of temporal and spatial coordinates which coincide with the Here and Now.» (Hamburger: 1973, 67) This discourse is not to be confounded with the implied author's discourse; it is a discourse uttered by an explicit narrating «I», an «apparent narrator» who is not necessarily a spokesman for the «real narrator», that is the author. (Pelc: 1971, 15)

In the novels where an impersonal discourse is embedded within the personal frame, the influence which such a frame exerts on the embedded material, as well as the ways in which the embedded discourse reflects the speaker of the higher frame, form part of the dynamics of the I-Origo's discourse.

The Eye, Nabokov's forth Russian novel, marks a turning point in his literary apprenticeship and is of a particular interest to our investigation as it marks Nabokov's first full exploitation of an I-Origo discourse. Since all subsequent novels following *The Eye*, with the exception of *Glory*, *Laughter in the Dark*, and *Transparent Things*, are permeated with an I-Origo discourse, these exceptions are made to stand out by virtue of their lack of such a discourse. The I-Origo appears in the novels under different guises, but his narrative function remains the same. In the novels where the narration is extradiegetic-homodiegetic, as in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Lolita*, the I-Origo is the explicit extralinguistic referent of the signs that form the narrative; where the narration appears to be extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, as in *Invitation to a Beheading* (in this case, Prin) becomes a focal figure, and the perspective assumed is that of internal focalization (in Genette's sense). In the case of the extradiegetic-heterodiegetic position, however, the I-Origo becomes the implicit extralinguistic referent, a fact indicated by the existence of the personal narrative framework. In both instances, moreover, the narrative perspective assumed is that of «vision avec», one in which the focal figure is grasped «non dans son intériorité, car il faudrait que nous en sortions alors que nous nous y absorbons, mais dans l'image qu'il se fait des autres, en quelque sorte en transparence dans cette image. En somme, nous le saisissons comme nous nous saisissons nous-même dans notre conscience immédiate des choses, de nos attitudes à l'égard de ce qui nous entoure, sur ce qui nous entoure et non en nous-mêmes.» (Pouillon: 1946, 79)

This formal characteristic of the «vision avec» corresponds to a certain epistemological premise concerning the self's ability to know itself; Sartre comments: «il faut remarquer, en effet, que le caractère n'a d'existence distincte qu'à titre d'objet de connaissance pour autrui. La conscience ne connaît point son caractère - à moins de se déterminer réflexivement à partir du point de vue de l'autre ...» (Sartre: 1943, 416, italics mine) It is this perfect correspondence between form and content that informs the Nabokovian I-Origo discourse. Locked within its own (twice removed) fictional discourse, the I-Origo sets on an hermeneutic mission to solve the enigma which is himself. As a narrating «I» he is at once the product and the creator of the narrative; as a fictional self he is an empty space defined indirectly, like the eye of a storm, by the very activity which brings him into being.

2.0 The Hermeneutic Mission: the case of *The Eye*

As is the case with most of Nabokov's novels, the hegemonic code in *The Eye* is the hermeneutic code - the novel is chiefly concerned with presenting an enigma and leading to its solution.³ In *The Eye*, the enigma bears a dual aspect since the novel introduces two questions: «who is Smurov?» and «who am I?». The first question is posed by the I-Origo and is resolved as Smurov and the narrator seem to converge at the end of the novel. It is the second part of the enigma, however, that signals the I-Origo's central position in the text; it is his introspective activity that is the source and origin of the narrative.

On the most elemental level of the text (*The Eye*), the enigma is introduced through the manipulation of personal pronouns, that complex category of indexical symbols, or shifters, that is considered to be «the most

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elementary and primitive stratum of language.» (Jakobson: 1971, 132) The novel opens with the following sentence containing several indicators of the deixis:

I met that woman, that Martha, during my first autumn of émigré existence in Berlin, in the early twenties of two spans of time, this century and my foul life.» (p. 13, italics mine)

This opening sentence already indicates that the narrative strategy assumed is of the extradiegetic-homodiegetic type. Within this form, which is of an autobiographical nature, one notes a necessary distinction between narrating I and narrated I, a distinction which corresponds to the one between the participant of a speech event and the participant of a narrated event. (Jakobson: 1971, 132)

Within this framework one moreover notes, from a purely linguistic point of view, the hegemonic status of the enunciating level. The personal pronoun, indicator of the enunciated I, together with the demonstratives, indicators of the enunciated event, depend, for their decoding, on a reference to the enunciating instance and its protagonist, the enunciating I. Thus, it is on the enunciating level that the enigma in this text is situated, for in the place of the enunciating I we again find an indexical symbol, a personal pronoun. As Benveniste notes in his study of «l'homme dans la langue», certain basic needs pertaining to the use of language as a means of inter-subjective communication are answered by the existence of the indicators of the deixis which are 'empty signs, «non référentiels par rapport à la 'réalité', toujours disponibles, et qui deviennent 'pleins' dès qu'un locuteur les assume dans chaque instance de son discours.» (Benveniste: 1966, 254) Since these signs depend for their signification on the specifications of the enunciator, they are «distinguished from all other constituents of the linguistic code by their compulsory reference to a given message.» (Jakobson: 1971, 132) A major problem arising out of the use of indexical symbols is thus one related to the handling of the message, or the «pragmatic context»; this context, which is perfectly clear to the producer of the message and which is «not formulated but assumed to be tacitly understood in any act of communication, need not be understood in this way by a recipient and may be understood in various ways by various recipients.» (Bar-Hillel: 1970, 79)

The text of *The Eye* manipulates the status of the personal pronoun as an indexical symbol for the presentation of the enigma. Taking advantage of his position as an enunciator, the I-Origo avoids any mention of those external pieces of evidence that form his pragmatic context: his name, his present residence, occupation, etc. Consequently, when in the process of objectifying his world, both the external world and his inner world, he attributes these same pieces of information to one Smurov (whom he later identifies as himself), the narratee is presented with an enigma concerning the relation of the «I» to the pragmatic context which is, ultimately, the only key to his existence as an enunciating I.

The enigma concerning the I-Origo's identity is presented in *The Eye* through a systematic dispersion of the enunciating self. The novel posits an I, both an epistemological I and a discursive «I», whose attempts at introspection and self-knowledge are traced and recorded. The introduction of an ulterior extradiegetic-homodiegetic form (personal narrative in the past) is highly appropriate for the purposes of introspection, for as has been noted by Ryle, retrospection car-

ries much of «the load of which introspection has been nominated for the porter.» (Ryle: 1949, 167) Moreover, since the units of a personal narrative are «feigned reality statements» (Hamburger, p. 315) within which a subject-object relationship exists between narrating I and narrated I, an initial splitting of the self is already affected.

As the enunciating I immerses himself in the enunciated I (his past self), and finally merges with him, a further split takes place. First, we are made to realize that the enunciated I, who eventually becomes the focal figure, is constituted of several, more or less chronologically presented, past selves, invoked by the diegesis for purposes of analogy (pp. 15, 21). Furthermore, the enunciating I himself attests to his being a self given to introspection: «Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed, even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself.» (p. 17) The progressive objectification and splitting of the self illustrated by the above sentence is further reinforced in the text through a recurrent rhetorical device, first introduced in the following sentence: «and on those terrible pastel-blue mornings ... I would imagine somebody who goes mad because he begins to perceive clearly the motion of the terrestrial sphere: there *he* is, staggering ... and his heart would burst when the speed became intolerable.» (pp. 17-18, italics mine) In this, and other similar passages (pp. 27, 28, 37), a shift in narrative strategy occurs on the micro-text level, from extradiegetic-homodiegetic to extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, with the «he» as a focal figure, momentarily replacing, usurping, the «I». This «he», however, is nothing but an extension of the I's introspective self, as the general context and the metaphorical quality of the passages indicate. Several such passages are introduced before the major shift, namely the introduction of Smurov, takes place. These passages serve a twofold purpose: firstly, their grammatical position in the text (the conditional present) reinforces the enunciating agent's involvement and asserts the acuteness of the epistemological premise. Secondly, they demonstrate the enunciating I's tendency to objectify his own states of mind, anxieties, etc., thus preparing the ground for the presentation and solution of the central enigma.

The shifts in the I-Origo's position from extradiegetic-homodiegetic to extradiegetic-heterodiegetic, coupled with the enunciating agent's avoidance of any mention of his name, render possible one of the most colossal Nabokovian «honest deceptions of the third kind», consisting of a «solution to a mystery hidden within its own presentation.» (Rowe: 1974, 179) The «he», «one», and «somebody» of the above mentioned passages grow from mere rhetorical figures into an actual character in the story. Thus, within the overall extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrative scheme there emerges an inverted, mirror-image narrative in which the I-Origo's two basic constituents, the I-observer and the I-observed, assume the dimensions of two separate characters, one a nameless narrator, the other a faceless Smurov.

Thus, the hermeneutic process unfolding itself in the novel has a dual aspect as it involves both a detective-story plot line concerning the identity of Smurov, and an epistemological element tracing the contours of an enigmatic I. This bifurcating structure is a significant Nabokovian constant: an epistemological query, posed by the I-Origo's introspective activity, is countered or complemented by an enigma related to the sto-

ry's code of action. The detective-story enigma type develops through redundancy and repetition; to this plot line correspond the enigma of Mary's identity in *Mary*, Sebastian Knight's identity in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, that of Quilty in *Lolita*, the identity of the narrator of *Invitation of a Beheading*, that of the king of Zembla in *Pale Fire*, and the self-avowed resemblance between Hermann and his 'double' in *Despair*. In *The Eye*, the final convergence of the narrator and Smurov is the logical outcome of a built-in pattern of structural and thematic clues, established through repetition and recurrence. Among the systems of clues pertaining to this enigma type are the shifts in narrative strategy, the recurrence of the «heart» motif in relation to both the narrator and Smurov, the overlapping statements concerning the narrator's and Smurov's involvement with Vanya, the occasional references to bullets by both the narrator and Smurov, and the constant undermining, by the narrator, of his assumed posthumous pose.

The epistemological query, on the other hand, progresses towards dispersion, plurality, and absence; its manifestations are formed at the level of the indexical symbols and are further reinforced through shifts in narrative strategy.

In the case of *The Eye* the gradual dispersion of the self affected by the I-Origo's act of introspection, and the correlation between the hermeneutic procedure and the shifts in narrative strategy could be described as follows:

step 1. enunciating I: statements in the present tense, the tense of enunciation, implying a split in the speaker (Benveniste: 1966, 252)

narrative strategy: extradiegetic-homodiegetic

step 2. enunciating I vs enunciated I: rupture of continuity due to the stylizing factor of memory

narrative strategy: extradiegetic-homodiegetic

step 3. enunciated I (split): I-observer vs I-observed

step 4. enunciated I (further split): suicide

consequences:

a) body dismissed;
a ghostly I emerges,
vascillating between a
disembodied ghost and
the enunciated I

b) pure imagination
recreating a world
populated by Smurov
and the other
characters who are
seen as mere
reflections of him

narrative strategy: extradiegetic-heterodiegetic

step 5. enunciating I = enunciated I = ghostly I = Smurov

narrative strategy: apparently extradiegetic-homodiegetic again

BUT

fissure no. 1 «There is no use to dissemble - all these people I met where not live beings but only chance mirrors for Smurov ... Hosts and guests at 5 Peacock Street move before me from light to shade ... created merely for my amusement.» (p. 99)

and

«For I do not exist ... there exist but the thoughts, mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make the population of phantoms resembling me increases.» (p. 113)

fissure no. 2 † = Smurov

and

«I alone do not exist. Smurov, however, will live on for a long time.» (p. 113)

narrative strategy: it is impossible to decide whether the narrative is ultimately homodiegetic or heterodiegetic; the ambiguous status of the narrator is the very essence of the enigma.

The narrative seems thus to be constructed around a central informational gap, in relation to which all the narrative units can be defined. This gap is central, permanent, and is located on both the *histoire* and the *discours* levels. It is this gap, these fissures, black holes, in the text which are the I-Origo's points of reference, the space which accommodates him. By dissociating himself from the fictional being which he is (Smurov), the I-Origo transgresses the rules of his very mode of being, thus denying both fiction and reality their accustomed value.

3.0 If we turn now to examine the semantics of the I-Origo's discourse, two distinct features are made to stand out: his position in the Nabokovian text as an agent of subversion, and his role in perpetuating an onward movement in the text towards a utopic locus, the inattainability of which is the very force which propels the attraction towards it.

3.1 The I-Origo's subversive idiom is permeated by the language of delusion; in *The Eye* one is already trapped in a world where «it is frightening when real life suddenly turns out to be a dream, but how much responsible - suddenly starts to congeal into reality.» (p. 108) The blurring of boundaries occurs in *The Eye* in a gradual manner and is highly significant in terms of the I-Origo's narrative function. The opening paragraph already introduces the signs of the I-Origo's language: «Someone had just found me a house tutor's job in a Russian family

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that ... still subsisted on the *phantasmata* of its old St. Petersburg habits.» (p. 13, italics mine) The metaphorical use of language here is but a first step towards the total undermining of the status of reality. From expressions of doubt and uncertainty, such as «I found it highly unpleasant to conjecture that perhaps it was not her fantasy at all,» (p. 16) through the use of images related to other illusion promoting arts, such as «perhaps, ... at that moment a jealous fiend in Paris, sensing his predicament was *acting* the banal role assigned to him by his wife,» (p. 17, italics mine) the narration finally proceeds to assume the idiom of spectral, disembodied phantoms, the idiom of mirage occurrences and chimeras, the language of fantasy and dreams: «I noticed Vanya immediately, and immediately my heart gave a flutter; as when, in a dream, you enter a dream-safe room and find therein, at your dream's disposal, your dream-cornered prey.» (p. 39) As is the case with the Kafkaesque idiom, the I-Origo's language forms an integral part of the story: it propels it, it pushes it forward. From his vantage point, the I-Origo makes the equation chance-fantasy (pp. 38-39), equating real life with artistic or imaginative creation, and thus projecting unto the text a negative space in which neither has a concrete, positive existence.

The I-Origo's subversive idiom serves as an index for a particular existential position. Since one of the assumptions underlying the Nabokovian universe is the paradoxical «all reality is a mask» (*Nikolai Gogol*, p. 150), the Nabokovian subversive act consists in producing a text that systematically undermines itself. The I-Origo's position is a chief factor in the perpetuation of this condition. By virtue of his being the explicit (although, of course, fictional) producer of the text he is, indeed, a masked Nabokovian mask, a being inextricably connected to its creator through the umbilical cord of the Artist, the producer of language. Consequently, the I-Origo's attempts to unmask himself inevitably lead not only to the dispersion of the self, but to the ultimately subversive epistemological act, that which is taboo for all creatures of fiction: the knowledge of their creator. When the narrator of *The Eye* first makes the equation I-Smurov, and then proceeds to dissociate himself from Smurov as a fictional character, he is performing this very act; he is pointing away from himself, at his real creator, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov.

The Eye is Nabokov's first full-fledged exploration of an I-Origo discourse, and it is only in his last novel, *Look at the Harlequins!* (*LATH*) that this discourse gains new depths of artistic insight. *LATH* is the I-Origo's autobiography, the story of his past selves, the producer-selves of the previous novels. Thus, the dispersion of the self already recorded in the novels, from *The Eye*, through *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Bend Sinister*, to *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada*, takes on here a new threatening dimension due to the large body of creative history separating Vadim of *LATH* from the nameless narrator of *The Eye*.

LATH's center of gravity is formed by a number of parallels involving Vadim's life (present I-Origo), Nabokov's novels (past selves of this I-Origo), and Vadim's novels (versions of these past selves). In principle, the basic situation of *The Eye* is repeated in this last novel: not only is the dispersion of the self seen as a consequence of the very activity which brings the I-Origo into being, it is also a sign of a centrifugal movement, a

movement away from the text towards the forbidden domain of 'real life'; like the narrator of *The Eye*, like V. in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, like *Pale Fire's* Kinbote, Vadim, too, is allowed a glimpse of his creator, and confesses: «I was bothered ... by a dream feeling that my life was the non identical twin, a parody, an inferior variant of another man's life.» (p. 89)

3.2 The clearly dialectical nature of Nabokovian rhetoric is further reinforced through an endless proliferation of perceptual and narrative levels. The plurality of the text, initiated by the I-Origo, engenders another Nabokovian narrative constant, that of the «great rosegray never-to-be-had.» (*Lolita*, p. 266) The «branching structure of life» to which the I-Origo is a willing witness, this «parting of ways, a 'thus' and an 'otherwise'» which one senses in every past experience, gives birth to a new dream, the possibility of «an unimaginable happiness» (*The Eye*, pp. 38-39). This happiness is, invariably, throughout Nabokov's fiction, associated with a mental image, the image of love and tenderness, the image of «a burning loveliness which replaces everything else and justifies everything, and which, unlike a human soul (often accessible and possessable), can in no way be appropriated.» (p. 80) The I-Origo's introspective act, the dissociation of the self from itself, is thus closely related to the I-Origo's chase of a mental image; being a creation of its beholder's mind, this image can never be reached, this happiness can never be attained, never appropriated.

In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert's quest becomes the epitome of the I-Origo's condition: a continuous movement towards a void. The passion which motivates H.H., the image which obsesses him is forever locked in the prison of his mind; like Mary in *Mary*, like Vanya in *The Eye*, Charles the Beloved in *Pale Fire*, Ada in *Ada*, and the list is long, *Lolita* is but another phantom. Confesses a satisfied and relieved H.H.: «what I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful *Lolita* - perhaps, more real than *Lolita*; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness - indeed, no life of her own.» (p. 64) The quest can be thus seen as another avatar of the introspective act, for it is the search for a utopic locus, for that inaccessible reality at the very core of one's imagination and desire.

4.0 In conclusion, the I-Origo's major function in the novels is to translate a certain epistemological stand into the language of fiction. His fluctuating grammatical, as well as narrative, status are the manifestations of a fluid self, a self involved in an endless recreation of itself through language, a self who points out at the absence of a stable center. The solution to the enigma posed by the I-Origo's introspective activity is inherent in its very presentation; the I-Origo's language, the constant metamorphoses which he undergoes as narrator-narrated, underlie a world of «soul dissolution» (Nabokov's foreword to *The Eye*) a world in which a soul «is but a manner of being ... not a constant state.» (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, p. 204) Like the personal narrators of Unamuno's and Nerval's novels, the Nabokovian I-Origo is a reflexive consciousness whose introspective activity bears the mark of the double. Vascillating between «I» and «he», between «me» and «the other»,

between monarch and lunatic, the I-Origo proceeds to produce a mechanism which eventually brings about his own fragmentation and dispersion. In this context one cannot but recall Nabokov's own predicament, the predicament of the exile, «l'homme qui parle à travers la distance, prenant la distance même comme origine et demeure de sa parole.» (Ronse: 1966, 873)

The absence of a center gains a further metaphysical dimension as the I-Origo's acute self-consciousness performs the subversive act of assimilating an awareness of its real creator within its own fictional space. The I-Origo's position is thus seen to implicate not only the fictional universe for which the I-Origo is directly responsible, but the «real world» as well, the world which lies beyond the written word, the world which is Nabokov's and ours. The I-Origo's repeated attempts at self-knowledge are inextricably connected with his identification of the Book and the World; says Vadim, the I-Origo cum autobiographer: «In this memoir my wives and my books are interlaced monogrammatically, like some sort of watermark or ex libris design.» (p. 85) Frightful consequences stem from this innocent taology, «this one, in the first place: there is no longer a point of reference. The world and the book mirror their mutual reflections eternally.» (Blanchot in Monegal: 1972, 28)

Footnotes

- 1 The terms *histoire* and *discours* are employed here in the sense attributed to them by Tzvetan Todorov in «Les catégories du récit littéraire,» *Communications*, no 8 (1966).
- 2 The definition of a personal narrative adopted for the purposes of this study is the following:
The personal narrative is a fictional narrative discourse, presented as an act of communication of an explicit speaker who is therefore held responsible for the utterances within the discourse but who is not the author of the text; it is a direct, centered discourse, organized within the framework of the indexical deixis category, in which the subject of the speech event is also the subject of the narrated event. (Tamar: 1976, 418, italics hers)
- 3 «décisions d'appeler code herméneutique...l'ensemble des unités qui ont pour fonction de formuler une énigme et d'amener son déchiffrement.» (Barthes: 1970, 24)

References

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Biography

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